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ABSTRACT

Beliefs about distinct differences between expressive and academic discourse unnecessarily complicate the teaching of writing. A composition pedagogy which fails to attend to the complications arising from the rhetorical aspect of language leads to the promotion of reasoning as separable from context. Reasoning then becomes a skill to be learned in order to prevail, not an activity which shapes itself to the needs of the audience. Academic discourse as skills suggests a commodified view of knowledge, perpetuating a view of the instructor as one who has knowledge. Writing classes best serve students if they persuade them to engage in the effort to reclaim themselves and their culture by engaging in critical inquiry. Peter Elbow (1991) argues that essential differences between academic discourse and ordinary language do not exist, and that both modes present the same features: reasoning and evidence, conventions, etc. Elbow champions the use of personal writing as a means for students to increase the use of writing throughout their lives. However, Elbow insists on emphasizing the learning of conventions. Critical inquiry, a fundamental activity in a democratic society, offers the best approach to the teaching of writing. Classical rhetoric, especially as in dialectical modes described by Plato and Aristotle, provides a basis for composition teaching. By enlisting the rhetorical insights of these philosophers concerning how people are persuaded, composition teachers may be able to show that academic and expressive writing are matters of style and convention which, in turn, are secondary matters contingent upon audience and questions at issue. (HB)

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Ralph Batie
Conference on College Composition and Communication
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I want to thank Kim Hicks for presenting us with this problem, of rethinking the passionate and reanimating the academic. The need to do this arose when students in a college composition course, asked to write in a personal, "expressive" mode, resisted that invitation. Many felt that such writing, because expressive, is also feminine, hence weak, compared to another kind of writing which is academic, impersonal, masculine and powerful. I have noted that students' discussions and unarticulated attitudes often reflect a preference for non-academic writing that is subjective, "free," and yet they are uneasy with it for the same reasons. Students exhibit a corresponding anxiety with "disciplined," academic, or formal writing, because although they feel it carries weight, it is not their language.

Whatever our own attitudes about academic writing, regardless of whether we see it as a good thing, and students' inadequate command of it as a decline in standards, even a public disgrace, students' believe academic writing <u>exists</u>, and these beliefs about it unnecessarily complicate the teaching of writing, as do our own beliefs.

I will review some points in an article by Peter Elbow in which he deals with the issue of characterizing expressive and academic discourse in the ways we do, then consider some perspectives from classical rhetoric that offer a different way

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of dealing with it, and suggest that Aristotle's Rhetoric gives a framework within which conventions become secondary and on which we might base a a writing pedagogy that gives students a more useful perspective on this split.

From a rhetorical perspective, all language use, to one degree or another asks for attention, and thus has designs on an audience. A composition pedagogy which fails to attend to the complications arising from that aspect of language leads to teaching writing as a collection of skills and knowledge that can be transferred from one who knows it to one who doesn't. This is both unnecessary and debilitating: if argumentation, for instance, is taught as a skill to be learned, it promotes a view of reasoning as separable from the contexts which give rise to it, and so undermines the responsibilities that come with reasoned discourse. Reasoning, if isolated from context, and the need to earn assent from an audience, may be seen as a skill to be learned in order to prevail, regardless of the merits of an argument, rather than an activity that shapes itself to the needs of situations in which writers feel called on to respond. The latter is a riskier activity, for one's own mind might be changed in the course of responding to the situation. This seems to me to be an essential aspect of a public discourse appropriate for a society that hopes to become more, not less democratic.

Writing as mastery of conventions, style and organization also presents an inaccurate conception of knowledge and in doing so makes students seem less able than they are. It assumes

students don't already reason, and ignores the resistance of students to writing instruction, which itself can become an occasion for reasoning. Such a view also encourages students, in the interests of efficiency, to be passive and attempt, in terms of Friere's model, to uncritically "bank" whatever knowledge teachers are willing to pass on from their own store. It also devalues students' abilities and diminishes their willingness to engage in the work of learning how to write better.

Academic discourse as skills suggests a commodified view of knowledge and this reproduces unwarranted power relationships by perpetuating a view of the instructor as one who has knowledge and introduces confusion about teachers' and students' roles. If students belief that knowledge is something one has rather than what people can do with information, they are easily led to catering to the instructor so that she or he will give knowledge to them. But making a commodity more available, in our economy, also cheapens it; thus students might reasonably feel that teachers should not be interested in sharing it, because to do so would devalue teachers' knowledge, and lessen their authority.

I assume writing classes best serve students if they persuade them to take themselves and their capacity for language seriously, and persuade them to engage in the effort to reclaim and transform themselves and their culture by engaging in critical inquiry. How can we serve our students in this way, while resisting a reduced notion of knowledge as commodity and

writing as a technique, a mere facility with language, skill in applying formulae?

What might classical rhetoric have to add to what a respected contemporary figure in composition, Peter Elbow, has to say about the split between academic and personal writing? Elbow has written on this split in a way that illustrates how different assumptions about writing lead to different approaches to dealing with it.

After a survey of various kinds of academic discourses, in the February '91 College English, Elbow shows that essential differences between academic discourse and ordinary language don't exist; that the features which identify the kind of writing academics use when they write for each other -- the presence of reasoning and evidence, particular rhetorical stances, surface mannerisms, styles and conventions -- are all present in non-academic discourse, as well; differences between academic and expressive writing are matters of degree. His criticism of academic writing is that the authority these characteristics, in their more extreme, form tend to lend it also unnecessarily excludes non-academics and makes users of academic language sound like "an insecure or guarded person showing off" (CE 53:8; 148).

So far, we're pretty much in agreement, except that Elbow wants to blur the lines between academic and personal writing so as to make the conventions of academic discourse easier to learn, and as I tried to show, teaching writing as mastering conventions leads towards writing as the manipulation of audiences, and the

problems I outlined above. But a more compelling problem, I think is that some contemporary theories of composition give us and our students no compelling reason to write. Elbow alludes to this problem earlier in his essay. He notes

> a deeply unwriterly and pessimistic assumption -- held by many students and not a few colleagues, namely that no one would ever write except under compulsion. Why should we assume without discussion that we cannot get students to write by choice? .

He argues that the best test of a writing course is whether students will be more likely to use writing in their lives, and advocates the use of personal writing in ordinary language to "render experience" as a means to engage

> the most basic impulses that are involved in being a writer: to have fun telling a story and to give pleasure to others (136).

Composition courses or demonstrations of writing competency are required, however, in virtually all higher education. While we might, in the course of an introduction to college writing, be able to persuade students to adopt these ideas about writing and reading to have fun, I think there are several problems with this rationale; it might not be "fun" to engage in the "demanding intellectual tasks of clarifying claims and giving reasons" which Elbow concedes learning to write "academic" discourse requires, and for which he agrees it <u>should</u> be taught.

In his article Elbow is also led to accept the idea of separate discourse communities, each with its own conventions, the manifestation, I think, in academic life of the fragmentation characteristic of modern life. Now, there is no denying that in

the modern world, different discourse communities exist, and what I have to say here must not be construed as minimizing the importance of accepting, respecting and encouraging diverse discourses. There is a danger, however, in valuing the idea of distinct discourse communities without attending to the complications that idea entails -- in some cases, one hand should have an idea of what the other is doing. For instance, members of different discourses communities have a need to communicate across their boundaries about urgent matters of public policy which transcend their disciplines -- war and environmental concerns are everybody's business. Observing the conventions of a discourse community in these cases should be secondary to the reasoning in arguments about them, and reasoning should then be able to transcend conventional boundaries. Conventions themselves should sometimes be disputed.

Criticizing conventions begins with a feeling that something is awry. Critical inquiry extends this feeling to recognizing the need to know more, to find and examine the reasons for the feeling, and ultimately it extends to make that reasoning available to others. Automatically deferring to expertise denies the importance of feelings. Critical inquiry, in this sense, is a fundamental activity within any group of people in a democratic society. It also needs to take place between groups, and it must allow the participation of the whole person, feelings and all, even allow the discourse of the child (it was the child in the parable who pointed out that the emperor has no clothes). If we

agree that a liberal education should serve the interests of a democratic society, then viewing writing as understanding and mastery of conventions, without a critical perspective seems to lead toward teaching writing simply as a matter of communicating. If it stops there, however, if it gives no means to question expert knowledge, it does not serve the values of a liberal education, for it turns students away from critical inquiry towards mastering conventions and subltly encourages "getting along by going along."

Different assumptions about knowledge and language and reasoning lead to different approaches to teaching writing, and these assumptions have different consequences for how we teach, how we view the subject of teaching and the importance of writing. Classical rhetorics provide other and more compelling reasons to require college composition classes, and a better rationale for engaging in the "demanding intellectual tasks" that Elbow associates with the good in academic writing.

Some perspectives derived from classical rhetoric allow us to see composition as a kind of broadly applicable mode of inquiry, useful throughout college, but also, and more importantly, as the exercise of critical judgement in a community of inquirers. In classical Greece, composition teachers called sophists often used their knowledge of techniques of public speaking to teach students how to manipulate audiences, to create belief without regard to truth, even "to make the worse appear the better cause." For this reason, among others, Plato in the

Phaedrus virtually condemned all instruction in speaking and writing. He argued that audiences, in that case, had no chance to question a speaker or a written text, and claimed that skill with language without first ascertaining the truth of matters inevitably leads to unethical, one-sided persuasion. Furthermore, he claimed, arguing to prevail diverted attention from the supremely important task of knowing oneself, by undermining the philosophical search for truth. For this search he saw dialectic as the appropriate method, for in dialectical engagement one's errors might be pointed out in the give and take with an interlocutor.

Plato's criticism of rhetoric was familiar to Aristotle, yet Aristotle recognized rhetoric as a means for making knowledge -- Rhetoric was, in his view "concerned with the sort of things we debate . . . [and] that seem to be capable of admitting two possibilities" (Kennedy I, 2, xii). It was "an ability in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion" (I, 2. i). Rhetoric was the facility for making knowledge in areas which do not allow exact knowledge. Knowledge in these matters consists of reasoned claims which ultimately rest on beliefs, which are often based on "allegiance" to other beliefs which themselves are not "provable," in the sense that mathematical formulae are provable. Nevertheless we can choose to believe and to use rhetoric to argue for certain things -- that justice might be established; that it is better than injustice; that a democratic society is a good thing; that education in the art of

language will facilitate the operation of participants in a democratic society in the effort to achieve a just society, for instance.

Aristotle also recognized rhetoric as a counterpart of dialectic, in that a conscientious pursuit of the reasons for one's beliefs, and possible opponents' objections might allow a kind of dialectic. He also recogized rhetoric as a means of making knowledge in the area of public policy, and criticized the handbook writers, the sophists, for concentrating on emotional appeals and ignoring the logical aspect of rhetoric.

Within rhetoric, he described the enthymeme as the means of discovering and formulating means of persuasion. The enthymeme is a structure of argument designed to achieve persuasion through incorporating a belief of an audience and building on it towards accepting another conclusion through the use of reasoning. A good rhetorician was thus a good "enthymemer;" that is, he was accomplished at understanding the structure of arguments, including their emotional dimensions. The enthymeme was both a means of analysis -- of finding the reasons both for and against a particular claim -- and a means of persuasion. In Aristotle's view, good and bad arguments can be structured the same; only the ethical character of the rhetorician separates the rhetorician from the sophist. In Aristotle's view, rhetoric could be the practice of honest persuasion, an intellectual practice of inquiry in which the attempt to persuade leads to the search for the best reasons for belief, and the effort to make those reasons

available to an audience. Aristotle understood that rhetoricians addressed the whole person; that "proofs" (a better translation is "the persuasives," that is, what persuades living, situated people) could be the logical aspect of arguments, the character of the discourse itself and emotional conditions which make responsible judgements possible.

How might this perspective serve in contemporary writing pedagogy, to address the problem of academic or formal writing having the appearance of impersonal authority, and typically carrying more weight than personal, "informal" writing? We might begin by considering how people are persuaded, noting that persuasion can be a matter of degree; we can show students that whatever the institutional or social weight the authoritative tone of academic writing carries, ethical discourse must earn assent through its ability to engage an audience and give good reasons for its conclusions. Analyzing discourse for the structure of its enthymemes, its claims and reasoning, whether in exposition or fiction, prose or poetry, allows us to identify the assumptions on which arguments are built. It enables students to see all language use as "interested," and that the weight of arguments should be proportionate to the strength of their reasoning. It also lets us see that academic and expressive writing are matters of degree, matters of style and convention, which, although real, are secondary matters contingent upon audience and questions at issue.